VNCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-0752 MAY 10, 1976
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EUROPE'S COMING ELECTIONS

ANNCR:

WESTERN EUROPE IS BEGINNING TO FEEL THE EFFECTS OF ELECTION FEVER, PARTICULARLY IN ITALY -- AS VOA CORRESPONDENT WILLIAM WADE EXPLAINS IN THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM OUR WEST EUROPEAN BUREAU:

VOICE:

THE ITALIANS GO TO THE POLLS NEXT MONTH IN A PIVOTAL ELECTION THAT ALREADY HAS ATTRACTED ATTENTION AND DEBATE FAR BEYOND ITALIAN SHORES. ITALY'S CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS, IN POWER FOR THIRTY YEARS, ARE IN THE KIND OF DIFFICULTIES THAT MAY PROVIDE THE ITALIAN COMMUNIST PARTY WITH A RARE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE IN GOVERNMENT. THE ITALIAN COMMUNISTS THEMSELVES, SENSITIVE TO FEARS THAT THEY ARE HARBINGERS OF TOTALITARIAN GOVERNMENT, SAY THEY WILL ABIDE BY DECISIONS OF THE ELECTORATE -- INCLUDING ANY FUTURE DEFEATS PUTTING THEM OUT OF OFFICE.

THIS IS A KEY QUESTION FOR ITALY'S EUROPEAN COMMUNITY PARTNERS -- WHETHER A COMMUNIST PARTY CAN BE EXPECTED TO PLAY THE GAME OF POLITICS ACCORDING TO PLURALIST DEMOCRATIC RULES. AND IT IS A KEY QUESTION, ALSO, FOR THE NORTH ATLANTIC ALLIANCE, WHOSE MEMBERS TEND TO LOOK UPON COMMUNIST MINISTERIAL PARTICIPATION IN ANY ONE OF THEIR GOVERNMENTS AS A POTENTIAL DIRECT PIPELINE TO THE RIVAL WARSAW PACT.

WESTERNERS WELCOME ITALIAN COMMUNISTS SAYING THEY ARE CONVERTED TO THE KIND OF DEMOCRACY THAT ALLOWS A POLITICAL OPPOSITION GOVERNMENT. BUT THERE ARE WESTERN SKEPTICS

WHO ASK WHETHER THE CONVERTS -- OR THEIR SUCCESSORS -- WILL KEEP THEIR PROMISES. AND IT IS NOTED HERE THAT THERE ARE NO CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTIES PERMITTED TO STAND BY IN EASTERN EUROPE TO CAMPAIGN FOR OFFICE ON THE BASIS OF HOW THEY MIGHT SOLVE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS OR PROVIDE GREATER SOCIAL JUSTICE.

TWO OF WESTERN EUROPE'S SOCIAL DEMOCRATS -- CHANCELLOR HELMUT SCHMIDT OF FEDERAL GERMANY AND FORMER BRITISH PRIME MINISTER SIR HAROLD WILSON -- CONTINUE TO WARN AGAINST ELECTORAL ALLIANCES BETWEEN SOCIALISTS AND COMMUNISTS. MISTER SCHMIDT, WHO FACES A NATIONAL ELECTION HIMSELF IN OCTOBER, TOUCHED FRENCH SENSITIVITIES WHEN HE ARGUED THAT TO A CERTAIN EXTENT COMMUNIST STRENGTH IN FRANCE STEMS FROM THE UNCHANGED SOCIAL STRUCTURE UNDER GAULLISM. BOTH FRENCH COMMUNISTS AND FRENCH GAULLISTS HAVE REACTED SHARPLY. AND IN BRITAIN, SPEAKING FOR THE TINY BRITISH COMMUNIST PARTY, THE MORNING STAR NEWSPAPER SAYS THAT SIR HAROLD WILSON'S ASSERTIONS THAT COMMUNISTS ARE UNDEMOCRATIC IS A "TYPICAL COLD WAR LIE." IT IS A HEATED DEBATE THAT DOES LITTLE TO TELL US HOW COMMUNISTS WILL USE ANY POLITICAL POWER THEY WIN AT THE BALLOT BOX -- BUT IT DOES SHOW THE INTENSITY OF INTEREST IN EUROPE'S KEY QUESTION THIS SPRING.

GH/RCS